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Malthusian Population Theory and Indian Famine Policy in the Nineteenth Century

S. AMBIRAJAN

The rapid acceptance of the Malthusian population theory by the British middle class in the nineteenth century has many implications for British economic history, many of which have come under close scrutiny of economic historians and historians of economic thought. This acceptance in Britain was accompanied by the no less remarkable but less well studied phenomenon of the diffusion of these ideas among the administrators of Indian famine policy from time to time.

The Indian economy had always been vulnerable to droughts and famines. Those who ruled India before the British, as a rule, had no famine policy; but faced famines usually by any rough and ready means that was available. The main motivation in fighting famines was either humanitarianism or religious sanction. British administration, on the other hand, was highly impersonal, and consequently 'policy' (however imperfect) was an essential ingredient to its successful functioning. However, 'policy' was framed and executed by individuals¹ who were apt to be influenced by a variety of considerations. Among these considerations the role of received ideas occupies an important place.

Indian administrators viewed the problem of famines both in a long-run perspective as well as an immediate urgency. As far as famines are concerned as an immediate problem the opinion was remarkably unanimous. The cruel question was how to allocate the given amount of resources in the best possible manner. Received doctrine told them that the answer was to be found in the maintenance of a free market. We have discussed the practical consequence of this belief elsewhere.² If Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' influenced their solutions to the problem of the allocation of scarce grain resources during shortages, the inexorable and grinding law of population originally enunciated by Thomas Robert Malthus provided the intellectual basis for the Indian administration's long-run perspective about Indian famines. The negative approach to famines in the short run was buttressed by a belief in the Malthusian population theory. In this context, the argument would run somewhat like this: What is the use of saving lives when once again the people so saved would suffer later in the same way? The purpose of the paper is to report this relatively neglected aspect of the diffusion of Malthusian ideas.

Although Henry Dundas, President of the Board of Control for India, found 'the best possible proof of the real improvement of the country' in 'its increasing population',³ the average Indian civil servant, even in the early part of the nineteenth century, did not often share this view. It would appear that Sir Thomas Munro, in a letter to his sister in 1795, had anticipated Malthus's debunking of the French romantic philosophers and the 'positive' checks, a full three years before the appearance of the *First Essay*.⁴ Malthusians were not wanting in India, both among the casual observers and civil servants. Abbé Dubois, a Catholic missionary, contradicted the notion entertained by some civil servants that the rise in population indicated an increasing prosperity, and stated:

'I am persuaded that as the population increases, so in proportion do want and misery . . . in a country where the inhabitants are notoriously apathetic and indolent, where customs and

¹ See my forthcoming book: *Classical Political Economy and the British Raj in India*, Chapter 1, for an account of economic policy-making in India in the nineteenth century.

² See my paper 'Political Economy and Indian Famines', in *South Asia Journal of South Asian Studies*, 1, 1, August 1971.

³ Speech on 20 November 1796, *East India Budget Speeches*, Vol. II, p. 34.

⁴ G. R. Gleig, *The Life of Sir Thomas Munro*, Vol. I, p. 162.

institutions are so many insurmountable barriers against a better order of things . . . I have every reason to feel convinced that a considerable increase in the population should be looked upon as a calamity rather than as a blessing.’⁵

However, even the most doctrinaire civil servant did not go so far. When, in 1829, the Collector of Cuddappah complained that the prices had fallen because of a proportionately higher increase in agricultural production than population, the Board of Revenue of Madras felt that such a thing as agriculture outgrowing population could not have happened as it was at ‘variance with one of the best established truths of political economy. Population, if its principle of increase be unrestrained by any difficulty in finding the means of subsistence, will always increase at a much more rapid rate than any person at all conversant with the subject can imagine it possible that the agricultural produce of India should increase for any considerable number of years.’⁶

Although a large body of official opinion accepted the Malthusian population theory as such, it did not feel until the 1860s that India’s population was anywhere near the Malthusian limit. In the first half of the century, the policies and utterances of civil servants implied that they were more concerned with the problem of labour shortage than labour abundance because of the necessity to exploit the existing land resources of India. But the recurrence of famines in the 1860s effected a marked shift in the official attitudes, and it was realized that population growth was a serious problem that merited close attention. As we shall see in the following pages, there were two strands to this opinion. Some thought that the population problem in India was not insurmountable, and with proper measures such as emigration it could be contained for a long time to come. On the other hand, there was an equally strong body of officials and non-officials who were sure that India had already reached the Malthusian limit, and no government measures could alter the fact. These differing views in their turn exercised tremendous influence, not only on the suggested policies, but also on the measures taken to alleviate distress during the famines. For example, we can cite the contrasting attitudes of Northbrook (Governor General 1872–76) and Lytton (Governor General 1876–80), the former throwing all his resources into saving lives and the latter trusting to the workings of the market to perform the same job. Lord Lytton had firm faith in the Malthusian population theory, while Northbrook was of the opinion that the Indian famines did not operate as Malthusian positive checks. From the beginning, Lytton believed that the Indian population, because of the increase in fecundity:

‘has a tendency to increase more rapidly than the food it raises from the soil . . . whose consumption, in many places, trenches too closely on the crops already provided by its industry; and which, therefore, runs great risk of having no accumulated produce to depend upon, whenever the earth has failed “to bring forth her fruits in due season” ’.⁷

He had also the support of many official reports of the period, and one such, *Report Consequent to the Partial Census Conducted in India after the 1877 Famine* declared:

‘Southern India has enjoyed peace and tranquillity for many years during which the increase of population up to the limit of the sustaining power of the soil has been unchecked . . . the limits of increase of production and of population have been reached, and that the land, under the rude system of cultivation prevailing, now supports, and has for some years past supported, as large a population as can draw a subsistence from it.’⁸

⁵ *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*. Translated by H. K. Beauchamp, pp. 93–94.

⁶ *General Report of the Board of Revenue to the Court of Directors*, 3 February 1831, India Office Records, No. L/E/5/34, Fol. II, No. 180, Para. 7, p. 156.

⁷ See *Legislative Council Proceedings*, Vol. XVI, 1877, p. 588.

⁸ *Parliamentary Papers*. H.C. 298, Vol. LIX of Session 1878, Paras. 6 and 7.

Lytton, however, was not alone in applying the Malthusian population theory rigidly to the Indian economy in the second half of the nineteenth century. There were a number of writers who contributed to the formation of the view that the Indian population was at a Malthusian equilibrium. The first step in this argument was that, under pre-British rule, the Indian population was held in check. As the London *Economist* said: 'No doubt the incessant multiplication thus unhealthily stimulated was under the native system restrained by war and infanticide, by misery, death and pestilence . . .'⁹ Not only pre-British rule was cited as a case in point, but Indian territories under 'native' rule were also shown as exemplifying how the system did not favour population growth.¹⁰ Even during the period of consolidation of British rule, the system continued without any necessity for the operation of the extreme forms of the Malthusian positive checks. The problem of over-population and the consequent ruthless but natural operation of the positive checks began to be visible only after the economic revolution effected by the British rule. H. C. Irwin, himself a civil servant, felt that the only checks on the redundant Indian population were 'the want of food, war and disease'.¹¹ It was claimed that the British administration had removed the second check altogether and a considerable part of the third. The removal of some of these natural causes that normally keep down the population must inevitably cause an increase in population in advance to the capacity of the economy to maintain this population. Sir Robert Giffen, the eminent British statistician, declared that 'the Roman Peace we have established in India appears to be effective in removing many obstacles to the growth of population which formerly existed – what Malthus described as natural checks.'¹² And Sir Evelyn Baring thought that it was because of hygiene and famine prevention that mortality was reduced in India: 'the natural checks on the population which existed in the old Mahomedan days are taken off . . . the survival of the fittest argument does not hold good in India any longer.'¹³

The problem as they perceived it was, in the words of Hunter: '(we) have freed a tropical population from the tropical checks on its increase, without yet teaching it to submit to prudential restraints.'¹⁴ The result of this was that India had become a labour surplus country, where population increasingly pressed on the means of subsistence. Whereas until around the 1870s the demand was by the landowners for tenants, after it was the husbandmen who were looking for land to cultivate.¹⁵ Instead of this scarcity of land increasing rents, arbitrary government action, it was held by many, would tend to reduce them. This, too, had a natural effect in increasing the population. Sir Louis Mallet of the India Office, applying orthodox classical economic theory pointed out:

'The function of rent is to restrain the undue pressure of population on the soil. The presence of rent is the result of the demand for land pressing on the supply. To take the rent and divide it among the whole population, which is done when it is substituted for taxes, is to counteract and neutralize the operation of the law of supply and demand by stimulating the demand anew without increasing the supply.'¹⁶

Sir James Caird, an English academic and a member of the Indian Famine Commission of

⁹ *The Economist*, 9 May 1874, 32, p. 555.

¹⁰ Caird, *India: the Land and the People*, Chapter X.

¹¹ H. C. Irwin, 'Famines and State Duty', in *Calcutta Review*, 60, No. 120, 1875, p. 220.

¹² Sir R. Giffen, *Economic Inquiries and Studies*, Vol. II, p. 293. See also H. S. Maine, 'India' in T. H. Ward (Ed.), *The Reign of Queen Victoria: A Survey of Fifty Years of Progress*, pp. 518–521.

¹³ Evidence to the Gold and Silver Commission, *Parliamentary Papers*, Cmd. 5512–I, Vol. XLV of Session 1888, Q.7069. See also a letter to the editor from 'A Canal Engineer from Dehra Dun', *The Times*, 4 September 1874, and the following exchange of correspondence.

¹⁴ Hunter to Argyll, 12 April 1889, quoted in Skrine, *Life of Hunter*, p. 393. As early as 1866, an anonymous author in the *Calcutta Review* said that an effective method of keeping the increase of population within bounds 'consists in holding out prudential motives to the working classes'. See 42, No. 133, 1866, p. 99.

¹⁵ See the various writings of W. W. Hunter. For example, *Indian Empire*, 3rd edn. pp. 83–84.

¹⁶ Quoted in Bernard Mallet, *Sir Louis Mallet: A Record of Public Service and Political Ideals*, p. 166.

1880, in his special report to the Secretary of State for India on the economic conditions of India came to the conclusion that the 'produce of the country on an average of years is barely sufficient to maintain the present population.' This was the reason why 'scarcity deepening into a famine' was to become a frequent occurrence. Assuming the annual increase of Indian population to be one per cent, he calculated that 'the check caused by the late famine, through five million extra deaths, spread as it was over two years and a half, would thus be equal only to the normal increase over all India for that time'. Caird thus anticipated a growing population aided by 'habits and religion' which promote 'increase without restraint' and a diminishing agricultural production evidenced by shrinking land revenue proceeds.¹⁷ Caird and many other commentators pointed out that, if the agricultural productivity were increased, then the situation might improve for the Indian people.¹⁸

The conclusion, then, was that if there was not sufficient land to sustain the population, the surplus should be removed either by emigration or by death. The Malthusians among the Indian civil servants felt that the Indian famines were doing just that.¹⁹

One of the striking 'Malthusian' documents of the last quarter of the century was Sir George Couper's confidential memorandum on famine expenses submitted to the Viceroy, Lord Ripon.²⁰ According to Couper, famines were nothing but 'positive' checks. Indian famines seriously affected only the bottom 20 per cent of the population according to their income or wealth, a class composed of labourers, beggars, potters, weavers, etc. Even during the best of times, this class remained at the subsistence level. When famines reached the starvation point, this class naturally suffered first. In the words of Couper:

'If the famine mortality in 1879 be tested, it will be found that about 80 per cent of the deaths come from the labouring classes, and nearly the whole of the remaining 20 per cent from cultivators owning such minute plots of land as to be hardly removed from labourers.'

Although they died more rapidly than any other, 'still they reproduce themselves with sufficient rapidity to overcrowd every employment that is opened to them.' Couper predicted that very serious consequences would result if the attempt were made to maintain this section of the population 'to the full span of human existence, without at the same time providing safeguards against their reproduction'. It would be an impossible task because of the paucity of financial resources to secure for this section of population a sufficiently high social standing 'to act as a check on their production'. The result would be a too rapid growth in population, and famine administration consequently must become even more difficult.

¹⁷ Report dated 31 October 1879, *Parliamentary Papers*, Cmd. 2732, Vol. LIII of Session 1880. This was later published by Caird as *India: The Land and the People*, see p. 212.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 213 *et. seq.* See also the *Calcutta Review*, 74, 148, 1882, p. 382. '... the depression of the *ryot* and his dependents will not be removed, until the pressure of population upon the means of subsistence is lightened by getting from the soil a larger yield.'

¹⁹ This view was widely held. The *Economist* said that famines were brought upon by 'inevitable laws', 32, 1874, p. 555. See also C. L. Showers, 'Indian Famines: An enquiry into the causes', in *Journal of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India*, 5, New Series, Part 3. The members of the Famine Commission (1880), too, believed in this, and one of them, H. S. Cunningham, said: 'There remains only the other stern remedy for the redundant population competing unrestrictedly for the soil - disease and starvation; and in Behar we have, in my opinion, that terrible remedy already in sight. The inquiries which, for some years, were conducted by the Famine Commission left this conviction, with painful distinctness, on the minds of other members, I know, besides myself.' Minute dated, 20 November 1884 *Papers Relating to the Bengal Tenancy Act*, Vol. III, p. 1776. Somewhat surprisingly some Indians, too, held the view. T. C. Doss said: 'The truth is that any undue increase of population is counteracted by the operation of natural laws, and in addition to the ordinary causes of mortality, wars and epidemics, famines, inundations, cyclones and earthquakes, are the periodical rectifiers of overgrown population.' *A Practical Treatise on the Currency Question*, p. 141. Similarly the official organ of the *Poona Sarvajanik Sabha* declared: 'The rapid succession of devastating famines has no doubt been providentially intended as a correcting influence to thin the population of this inconvenient growth by one heavy blow, and in this respect calamities may not be without their use.' 'Overpopulation and Marriage Customs', in *Quarterly Journal*, 1, October 1878, pp. 24-25.

²⁰ Memorandum dated 24 June 1881. Add. MSS. 43, 615, pp. 27-31, *Ripon Papers* (British Museum).

According to Couper, the primary effect of keeping the starving section of the population alive was to stretch the wages fund of the country still further. If, then, these people increased by 20 per cent because of the prevention of famine deaths and a 'subsequent geometrical ratio of increase (was) artificially maintained by government charity', the effect would be to produce famine even if the slightest variations in agricultural production took place. Thus, after a time, this snowballing effect would result in a large and constantly growing class, 'called into and supported throughout life by the direct agency of government'. According to Couper, increased taxation as a result of large outlays on the famine-prone sections of the population would have the effect of driving the self-supporting people to the ranks of the penurious, dependent upon public charity. Couper could not, therefore, countenance the arrest of the process of natural selection or the survival of the fittest principle:

'If we are to secure that a class of men – so low in intellect, morality, and possessions, the retention of which makes life valuable, as to be absolutely independent of natural population checks – shall be protected from every cause, such as famine or sickness, which tends to restrain their numbers by an abnormal mortality, they must end up by eating every other class in the community.'²¹

Nor was Couper the only one who believed in the above doctrine. As early as 1861, Sir John Strachey had said that famine expenditures 'add to the difficulties of the rest of the community, and may bring with them evils which cannot be avoided.'²² Lord Lytton's government, of which Strachey was an important member, instructed Sir Richard Temple not to be too generous in administering the Famines in Southern and Western India. The Government made it clear that:

'It will not sanction a course of action which tend to demoralise the people . . . and inevitably lead to the imposition of heavy and permanent burdens on the industry of the country. . . . The embarrassment of debt, and the weight of taxation . . . would soon become more fatal to the country than famine itself.'²³

Strachey, like Couper, based his arguments on the views of John Stuart Mill, and these and many other Indian civil servants agreed with the dictum expressed by Mill in connection with the English poor-law:

'Every one has a right to live. We will suppose this granted. But no one has a right to bring creatures into life, to be supported by other people. Whoever means to stand upon the first of these rights must renounce all pretension to the last. If a man cannot support even himself unless others help him, those others are entitled to say that they do not also undertake the support of any offspring which it is physically possible for him to summon into the world.'²⁴

The general British opinion appears to have been that public charity encouraged people to rely on it exclusively. Sir Robert Giffen remarked that 'from the point of civilization and progress'

²¹ *Ibid.*, Couper not only believed in these ideas but also used them in administering the 1878 Famine that hit the North Western Provinces. See a contemporary comment by Robert Knight, *Sir George Couper and the Famine in the North Western Provinces*, (London, 1878).

²² Quoted in J. C. Geddes, *Administrative Experience From Past Famines* (1874), p. 17. Knight accused Strachey of 'belonging to 'the old school that does not believe in the new famine-relief policy . . . it is he, we fear, who struck the key-note of the Imperial policy . . . He regards it as a . . . Quixotic interference with Nature, to attempt to thwart her efforts to dispose of the surplus population of the land', *op. cit.*

²³ *Parliamentary Papers*, Cmd. 1751, Vol. LXV of Session 1877, p. 159. A. Rogers, of the Bombay civil service, similarly said in 1881 that legislation though beneficial in the short run, will 'cease to have effect the moment it comes in contact with natural laws'. *Land Tenures in Bombay*, pp. 15–16.

²⁴ *Principles of Political Economy*, p. 364.

millions of money spent in pauperizing Indians could not 'be contemplated with any satisfaction'. It was little 'more than a confession of the hopelessness of the difficulty'.²⁵

Again, famine was but one of the 'positive' checks to the inordinate increase in the population. The pauper class, said Couper, must 'die from disease if saved from famine'. Whereas famine took away only those who were a burden to the community, diseases did not spare 'others whom the community cannot so well afford to lose'. Couper's remedy, then, was to divert a large part of famine relief funds to 'schemes of improved administration, emigration and communications, – the most powerful agents in improving the condition of the people and developing their natural progress towards self-protection'. Couper was not really concerned with the short-run misery his policy would cause to the famine-prone population, for he derived solace from Walter Bagehot who had said:

'The most melancholy of human reflections, perhaps, is that, on the whole, it is a question whether the benevolence of mankind does more good or harm. Great good, no doubt philanthropy does, but then it also does great evil. It augments so much vice, it multiplies so much suffering, it brings to life such great populations to suffer and to be vicious.'²⁶

There was thus present a fear of demoralizing and pauperizing the Indian population.²⁷ To prevent this, the famine policies of these administrators advocated a minimum amount of relief, which should stop short of breeding paupers; as Lytton remarked:

'I am profoundly persuaded that every rupee superfluously spent on famine relief only aggravates the evil effects of famine, and that in all such cases waste of money involves waste of life.'²⁸

The prudent Sir John Strachey added the dictum: 'We should give somewhat too little than too much'. These ideas were blessed by Lord Cranbrook, the Secretary of State, in a pious declaration:

'In all civilized societies there is a vast amount of suffering and destitution, very lamentable to contemplate, but which it is wholly out of the powers of the state by any direct action to eradicate. All that Government can do is to take that its own institutions shall not aggravate the misery which so often follows the spontaneous action of the population.'²⁹

Of the four Viceroyalty who reigned in the seventh decade of the nineteenth century – the period when the population problem acquired prominence – there were no scarcities during the rule of Lord Mayo, the first of these four, and Lord Ripon, the last. Lord Mayo, with his rich experience of the Irish famines, believed that the recurrence of famines was due more to administrative lapses rather than to any natural dispensation.³⁰ Lord Ripon, to whom Sir George Couper had addressed his memorandum, was a great believer in classical political economy as may be inferred by his treatment of the currency question; nevertheless, he based his policy on humanitarian grounds, while not controverting the basic orthodoxy.³¹ In any

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, in footnote 12, p. 296. Giffen said that most of the 'leading public men and economists' accepted these views on Indian population.

²⁶ W. Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*, pp. 188–189. This sentence was cited by Couper in his memorandum.

²⁷ See, for example, Lytton to Mallett, 11 January 1877 (Lytton MSS, India Office Library). Even the Famine Commission, in spite of suggesting a positive famine policy, stressed the eradication of the 'positive' checks by the British rule and so asked the administrators to be wary of pauperism. It pointed out that the famine policy should be framed in such a way as 'to avoid every tendency to relax in the people the sense of the obligation which rests on them to provide for their own support . . .' and care must be 'taken to prevent the abuse and demoralisation which all experience shows to be the consequence of ill-directed and excessive distribution of charitable relief'. See *Parliamentary Papers*, Cmd. 2591, Vol. LII of Session 1880, p. 433.

²⁸ *The Indian Famine of 1877*, p. 71.

²⁹ Secretary of State to Governor in Council of Bombay, No. 4 (Legislative), dated 26 December 1878. *Despatches to Bombay*, India Office Records, Vol. L/PJ/3/1498, p. 266.

³⁰ See Hunter, *A Life of the Earl of Mayo*, Vol. II, p. 275.

³¹ Ripon to Hartington, *Ripon Papers* (British Museum), 8 April 1881, 12 November 1881. See also S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Ripon*, Chapter XII.

case, the decision of the manner in which a famine policy should be conducted was taken out of the hands of the Viceroys by the Famine Commission which suggested a uniform policy for all areas and occasions. Lord Lytton and Lord Northbrook, the two Viceroys who reigned in the decade and in whose rule famines occurred, nevertheless pursued opposite policies. As we have seen already, while both the Viceroys had great faith in the operation of the market mechanism as the best tool to ration the available resources through time, they differed as to the urgency of the population problem in India. Whereas Lytton believed that India had come to the limit, Lord Northbrook did not agree that India had reached the Malthusian equilibrium and felt that there was no danger of the Indian soil failing to support the increasing population through the onset of diminishing returns.

Keen observers like Caird and Mallet lent support to Northbrook's view by stressing that pauperism in Britain and India were not comparable. Mallet, a believer in the economic writings of Frederick Bastiat and John Stuart Mill, said that whereas in Britain the state looks after 'a very large portion of the superfluous members of families', in India they are 'entirely at the charge of the people.'³² Caird drew attention to the fact that India spent on famine relief less than two per cent of what Britain spent annually in relieving the poor.³³ In any case, the two leading civil servants, Sir Richard Temple and Sir George Campbell who had administered famine relief during the Viceroyalty of Northbrook categorically stated that Indians were neither pauperized nor demoralized by the liberal relief given during the famines.³⁴

The key to the solution of the Indian population problem lay in the expansion of communications. Observing correctly the existence of vast unutilized resources (especially cultivable but uncultivated land) Northbrook said:

'If the population increases faster than the means of subsistence the price of foodgrains would rise and inferior land be taken into cultivation, or what comes to the same thing, land which is out of the way and not now utilised, owing to the cost of transport from it, will be brought into use. India is so large a country that it has always seemed to me that, unless the law under which man exists on the earth is altered, there will be food for its population.'³⁵

The view that India was extensive and had the means to support the population if only they were distributed properly, was held by many even among those who saw the Indian population problem as very serious. Internal migration was greatly favoured. One of the arguments used by Strachey against large-scale public works was that such works impeded internal migration. As he pointed out, 'Nothing should be done to interfere with the natural operation of this means of relieving a suffering district by unduly stimulating the employment of the population

³² See Louis Mallet's minute dated 17 December 1877, *Financial Department Collections*, India Office Records, No. c/140. See also L. R. Ashburner (of the Bombay Civil Service)'s minute dated 4 October 1878, *Financial Department Collections*, India Office Records, No. c/141.

³³ *India, The Land and the People*, p. 210. Lytton, as we have seen, espoused the Malthusian population theory when confronted with the problem of finding resources to fight famines. Sir James Caird also used the Malthusian population theory in India with entirely different implications. According to Caird: 'Nature herself interferes by periodically cutting down by famine the surplus population.' However, he asked: 'If we rest content with this, what becomes of the boasted advantage of our rule to the people of India?' Caird's remedy was an active developmental policy to overcome the evils of overpopulation. Lytton did not agree. He objected, saying that, while the government could not do anything to restrict the population, in fact food production in India had gone ahead of the population even in the very densely populated areas. His conclusion, then, was that 'no immediate cause for alarm exists, and that no evil can be discovered for which it is at present necessary to provide any heroic remedy'. See, for Caird's Report on India, the reaction of Lytton and his Council to this Report, and Caird's Rejoinder, *Parliamentary Papers*, Cmd. 2732, Vol. LIII of Session 1880, pp. 159, 160 and 175.

³⁴ Campbell's *Memoirs*, Vol. II, p. 332, Sir Richard Temple's *Evidence Before the Famine Commission*, p. 49.

³⁵ Northbrook to Caird, 16 September 1879 Northbrook Papers (India Office Library), Sir George Campbell also thought that overpopulation was not yet a problem, but added that phase of the question 'may not be far off' (*Systems of Land Tenure*, p. 183). For a very similar view see A. Lukyn Williams, *Famines in India*, pp. 74 and 154, and *Irrigation in India in Connection with Indian Deficits*, by a Bengal Civilian, p. 6.

within the district.' The large works would involve an expenditure of large sums which would increase the price level and cause privation to the higher classes which might 'otherwise have escaped the rigours of famine'.³⁶ There was a strong body of opinion that shared the view that because of the availability of large empty spaces, 'the ultimate *pinch* may be postponed for many a day'.³⁷ Another writer suggested that it would take centuries before India suffered from overpopulation, and

'as long as there are tracts awaiting conversion to smiling fields . . . it is the duty of political economists aided by the executive to direct surplus population to them.'³⁸

Much as internal migration was advocated to relieve the congested areas, the government was not optimistic. Some attempts had been made to promote systematic migration to the less overcrowded provinces of India, for example, the tea districts of Assam and Burma (which was at this time part of British India) from the heavily populated Gangetic valley, but these attempts were not successful in spite of cheap transport costs resulting from improvement in communications. The government felt that such migration could never be adequate without very large state subsidies which it was not prepared to advocate. It was admitted that the high proportion of the poor and the 'increase of landless classes' were 'a very serious administrative difficulty'. In their eyes, the main obstacle to internal migration was 'the strong attachment to their homes which prevails among all classes in India'.³⁹

Once in a while emigration was suggested as a remedy for overpopulation in India.⁴⁰ This idea, too, was not wholly acceptable, and if any emigration took place it was not the result of a policy to relieve the surplus population. As the opinion that India was overpopulated came to be held only in the last quarter of the century, earlier attempts to assist systematic emigration were discouraged. In 1840, the Governor-General, Lord Auckland, decided against emigration from India, except to Mauritius on a very small scale. However, thanks to the colonial manufacturers in need of cheap labour, emigration was allowed soon after, in spite of the powerful opposition of some humanitarians in England, who saw in the systematic emigration of Indian labour a return to slavery by the backdoor. It has been suggested that the policy of allowing the colonial manufacturers to recruit labour freely in India might have also been due to the acceptance of the classical economic policy which frowned upon any obstacle to the international movement of productive resources.⁴¹ But the number who actually emigrated formed only a very insignificant part of the total Indian population.

³⁶ Geddes, *op. cit.* in footnote 22, pp. 10, 19.

³⁷ Argyll to Hunter, 16 April 1889, Hunter to Argyll, 12 April 1889, cited in Skrine, *op. cit.* in footnote 14, p. 395. According to Lord Salisbury, emigration 'seems to me the only way out of a difficulty which is closing round us'. Salisbury to Temple, 7 August 1874, *Salisbury Papers* (Christ Church, Oxford).

³⁸ A. P. Webb, *Agricultural Banks and Supplemental Legislation for Agricultural Relief*, p. 14. Major Sedgwick of the Royal Engineers pointed out that in addition to the vast uncultivated areas in India, there was an immense area in Australia suitable for occupation by the surplus population of India. *A Ready Remedy for India's Exchange Difficulties*, p. 37. Sometimes the motives behind these exhortations to promote internal migration were suspect. One author for example, cited from J. S. Mill and E. G. Wakefield to point out the duty of government to assist in colonization. But he was actually a planter and was concerned about the cost of landing coolies in his plantations. See the *Calcutta Review*, 40, 80, 1864, pp. 322-323. The editor of the *Review* objected to this view in a footnote, p. 343.

³⁹ See Governor General in Council to Secretary of State, 8 June 1880, No. 38 (1880), *Parliamentary Papers*, Cmd. 2732, Vol. LIII of Session 1880, p. 159. The Deccan Riots Commission in 1875 also referred to the reluctance of the people to leave their villages.

⁴⁰ See *The Pioneer* dated 23 October 1874.

⁴¹ See for instance, I. M. Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories*, 'Introduction'; and Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 23. It is interesting to note that the Memorial of the Sugar Manufacturers of Mauritius to the Governor-General of India in response to the Indian Government's decision to suspend Indian labour emigration (Government of India, Resolution dated 24 October 1856), referred not only to the large English capital sunk in Mauritius but also to the folly of taking such a decision just at a time when they were 'triumphantly solving the questions of free labour and free trade'. See the Memorial dated 26 December 1856, India Office Records, L/PJ/85, p. 46.

Even when the policy makers perceived the acuteness of the population problem, emigration to other countries was not taken seriously. The government did not place any restrictions 'on those who seek to better themselves in foreign lands', neither did it encourage such emigration. There were two reasons for such a lukewarm attitude towards emigration. On the one hand, it was considered by experienced officials that 'emigration cannot be regarded as a wholesome check upon our population'⁴² and, on the other, it was felt by the more thoughtful administrators that encouraging emigration would be a confession of failure to look after the true interests of Indians. Because of regional variations, population pressure was not felt with the same intensity in the different presidencies. It was only in the Presidency of Bengal that the pressure of population was felt so strongly that its government made attempts to encourage emigration. Whenever famines occurred, suggestions were made to direct a portion of the affected population to other colonies such as Burma. During the 1874 Famine, the Commissioner of British Burma offered to employ 6,000 immigrants in public works and give them land to settle on. He even offered to contribute 'something' towards the expenses of their transport.⁴³ The Government of Bengal also sent its Secretary to Burma to investigate the possibility of colonization, and the Burmese authorities agreed to provide 50 per cent of the transport expenses and offered certain favourable terms to capitalists wishing to cultivate lands there.⁴⁴ Apart from the attempts of the Bengal Government, which sought to drain the excess population of Bihar (which was then a part of Bengal), there was very little active encouragement in the other presidencies. While Bombay never had a population problem, the only area in the Madras Presidency that could be considered overpopulated was the fertile Tanjore delta. But even this district had the Ceylon tea plantations as a nearby refuge for its surplus population,⁴⁵

If the problem could not be solved by large-scale emigration, as was thought by a majority of officials, what was the solution? The universal opinion – shared even by the most incorrigible pessimists – was that Indian famines were the result of poverty, which in turn had many causes.

The famine policy of the Indian government was a composite of many things – classical political economy, helplessness, frustration, humanitarianism and even a certain callousness towards life. According to them there was apparently no serious or viable alternative to the free trade famine policy, for the problem of distribution could be ensured in no other way than by the freedom of the market. Many administrators, goaded by their humanitarianism, might in practice have tried to break through the classical net, but they, too, had no practical answer to the remorseless logic of the classical economists' thinking. If the available resources could not be allocated otherwise than through a free and uncluttered market mechanism, the only way out was to increase the supply of the available resources. It is then hardly surprising that all the suggested remedies for famine centred on measures to increase production, in other words, to achieve economic progress. Economic development involved diversification of employment opportunities, increasing productivity, provision of social overhead capital, a rational economic organization and industrialization. It was expected that the modernization of economic and social life that would result from economic progress would, in the long run, solve the major cause of poverty and famines, i.e. overpopulation itself.⁴⁶

⁴² See J. Geoghegan, *The Indian Cooly Emigration*, p. 24. A. P. MacDonell said that emigration to colonies was 'an insufficient safety valve' for overpopulation in India; although he spoke in favour of emigration bounties. *Report on the Food-grain Supply*, pp. xvi-xvii.

⁴³ See *Parliamentary Papers*, Cmd. 933, Vol. L. of Session 1874, p. 13.

⁴⁴ See F. H. B. Skrine, 'Memorandum on the Material Condition of the Lower Orders in Bengal', in *Dufferin Report, Parliamentary Branch Collection*, India Office Records, No. 221, pp. 54 and 55.

⁴⁵ J. Grose, Director of Revenue Settlement Lands Records in a Speech on 30 March 1888. Proceedings of Conference, *Dufferin Report*, cited in footnote 44.

⁴⁶ 'Prudential checks will also assert themselves as education penetrates the masses.' See Hunter to Argyll, 12 April 1889, Skrine, *op. cit.* in footnote 14, p. 395. W. T. Thornton, a friend of John Stuart Mill and an Indian Office bureaucrat, pointed out in 1875, 'of all moral impediments to excessive multiplication of the species, there is none more powerful as an elevated standard of material well-being'. *Indian Public Works*, p. 247.

This optimism concerning the future possibilities is in a sense a contrast to the essential pessimistic tone of the Malthusian population theory, and can only be explained by the idea of progress that was part of the mental make-up of the Victorian intelligentsia.